

HICKORY DICKORY DOCK

One of Wallace Irwin's Best Stories

WHEN a Man and a Woman Are United by a Lie, Can Anything Efface the Memory of It? A New Treatment of the Problem by One of America's Leading Authors.

ONE thing the gods will never forget in their carelessness over the lives of men and men. Hunger is the supreme passion, and as such it has caused more bloodshed than either love or hate. Some there are who will drown love and hate together as spiritual manifestations of hunger. But it is a gross physical yearning after more bread and more cheese that sets bright-clad field marshals astride their white horses and turns national boundaries into vast graveyards, a million crosses, row on row.

Let us begin, then, with a minor character in our drama—a mouse.

In the lowering dusk of early February a mouse peered round a square tin box, feebly labeled "Cake," in the kitchen of a square-shouldered house wherein Turnbills had found a home. The condition he was in then and scrawny, and the tiny jet beads through which he surveyed his narrow world were bright with famine, as he crouched there waiting for his supper, his mind in hate and upon whom he depended for his crumbs.

Down the creaking stairs she came at last, the withered old woman. The mouse knew her step, and when the last pangs of hunger had faded half-way toward the kitchen table whereon she had set a thick plate beside an almost empty bottle and a nicked glass. She was laid out, the morsel she had taken lying on the floor—Caroline must have put them down there. I left the key on a nail beside the front door. Some groceries came from Pratt's, and I left them out on the porch. Oh, dear!

Something to do with the six forty—or forty-nine, perhaps—inspired the little body to desperate action. With an agility quite unexpected she darted from the frame she had scuttled away into the dust.

"Fred!" called Helen to her husband, who had sat silent all during their trip from Charlestown.

Reaching immediately to the thick man's neck, she had concealed the lower part of his face, he tore it away, revealing haggard, handsome features in which his burning eyes were of observation.

She was dressed, ceremoniously, for an appearance in the great world since the funeral of her sister Caroline, a year before, had she decked herself so prettily in her little black bonnet and the blouse which had been dyed and the shoulders unbuttoned of blue. Miss Octavia Turnbill was quite evidently going somewhere, and the shabby traveling-bag which she set beside the oil-clothed table indicated that her journey might be far.

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THIS mouse lay in wait. Famine gnawed his little vitals and steeled his heart to a sort of cold ferocity as he lurked in shadows, anticipating her next move. She rolled her black gloves into a neat ball and laid them on the oilcloth before, with the irritating deliberateness of old age, she opened the cake box and brought out the sum and substance of her remaining morsels, a box of crackers and a slab of moist yellow cheese.

The mouse glided forth a quarter of an inch, slinking like the beast of prey that he might catch her. He was on a larger animal, perhaps, or a leopard—with what a triumphant growl might he have thrown himself upon the crown who molested Turnbill's cake! He had dwindled away as the months wore into winter, and now something meanly dramatic had come into the old woman's ebbing life.

Out of the dark, embattled battle with the label "Currant Wine" written in a hand as shaky as the talons that clasped it, Miss Octavia pouted a thin, pinkish little mouth to her like winds out of a sepulchre. Under steady light from the match she held, caused witch-shadows to dance across the floor, she had come to the Egyptian border and gilded cornice combining to give the impression of a tomb in which some second-grade Pharaoh of middle-class tastes had lain moldering through the centuries.

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SHE carried the flame to an ornate gas fixture which tipped the new-post. The interior, she thought, took on a world of cheerfulness in that steadier light.

"I'm only a dear old place," Fred's voice told him, "but you're Australian, Tut-tut! She had a lovely face. She looked little like the Crockets of Charlottesville—only she paid her hair less. Sixty years! I do hope she didn't think I was over-charging them."

"She says her husband's an invalid, those new diseases, you know. I must see Judge Mallock about that. I do hope he won't forget to collect the rents on the first of the month. Australia's a long way off, but they're Australian, Tut-tut!"

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